

Chapter 5
Beyond An Essentialist and Dualistic View of
Sympathy in George Eliot's Fiction

Sympathy and the qualities that inspire and sustain it - self-doubt, the sensitive understanding and tolerance of others' differences, and the self-transcending willingness to accommodate the needs of others that differ from those of the self - are valorized in Eliot's writings as morally powerful virtues, capable of resisting, mitigating, and even transforming the ruling values of patriarchy. Thus, the revaluation of qualities and values traditionally associated with women in Eliot's fiction is, from a radical perspective, not inconsistent with the aims of feminism.

The ambiguity undermining Eliot's significance as a

feminist writer, arising from reservations about the emphasis placed on the private, the obscure, and the seemingly stereotypical and reactionary in her fiction, is largely dispelled by radical feminist insights. In recent years, the application of radical feminist theory to readings of Eliot's writings has proven to be an increasingly popular critical approach as feminist readers seek to extend their unqualified admiration for Eliot herself to the realm of her fiction.

However, some readings betray a residual adherence to liberal feminist values, emphasizing public achievement over private and independence over interdependence, even as they elucidate the revolutionary significance of feminine values and roles as represented in Eliot's writings. The persistence of liberal values which have traditionally defined the goals of feminism in feminist critical thinking is to an extent necessary to temper the sentimental excesses of revaluation. There lies in such sentimentality the danger of reinforcing stereotypes that only serve patriarchal interests, as Alison Booth points out:

One of the great benefits of feminist analysis has been to provoke readers to storm the mental barricades that separate history and the political world of men from everyday life and the domestic world of women, to

challenge, as Eliot's and Woolf's writings do, the priority of public politics over private, or even to challenge the clear distinction between what is public and what is private. But there is always the risk of jumping over to the underprivileged side and adding sofa cushions and kitchen chairs to the barricades, thus reinforcing the dualism (and inevitable hierarchy) of public/private, male/female. (Booth, 24)

Nevertheless, the emphasis on liberal ideals like independence and public achievement may result in the critical edge being somewhat blunted in exploring the radical feminist insights afforded by Eliot's writings.

One thought-provoking radical feminist study of Eliot's life and writings is Jennifer Uglow's which is founded on the premise that in "a complex and unexpected way the most reactionary positions (from a twentieth-century feminist's point of view) - the good daughter, the loving wife, the self-denying mother - become the sites of a subtle and subversive argument for a radical change in our way of looking at life and organising society" (Uglow, 8-9). In Uglow's appraisal of the achievements of Eliot's heroines, however, it would appear that her standard of feminist heroism remains the liberal/masculine/patriarchal ideal of independence rather than the feminine ideal of

interdependence. Uglow pays tribute to Romola as a worthy feminist heroine because she regards Romola as "a passionate woman" who, in spite of "being told what to do all her life by men ... ends by shaking herself free altogether to become the matriarchal head of a household of women, shaping a boy of the next generation according to *her* beliefs" (Uglow, 159-160).

In the portrayal of Esther in *Felix Holt* who absorbs Felix's values and chooses to marry him, however, Uglow perceives that "[f]emale passion, purity, fluidity and irrationality associated with the creative imagination ... are bound inseparably to the notion of women as a relative sex whose lot is made by the love they choose" (Uglow, 190). Deeming this a "marked contrast to the stress on independence in *Romola* and *The Spanish Gypsy*", Uglow is led to conclude that the representation of feminine qualities in Esther is "alarmingly conservative (and regressive in the body of Eliot's work)" (Uglow, 190). Misgivings about Esther's lot being made by the love she chooses appear to have obscured for Uglow part of the "subtle and subversive argument for a radical change in our way of looking at life and organising society" that can be found in Esther's roles as "good daughter" and "loving wife" (Uglow, 9), in her daughterly kindness to Mr. Lyon and Mrs. Transome and her decisions to renounce her inheritance of Transome Court and to marry Felix.

Accepting that Eliot's conception of gender and values

is rooted in essentialism and dualism may pave the way to a more thorough and consistent revaluation of the qualities and values conventionally associated with women. Reflected in Eliot's fiction is an essentialist definition of sympathy as an inherent female virtue. Also reflected is a dualistic view of human values that polarizes the masculine and the feminine, vilifying one and valorizing the other.

Of the three novels selected for this study, traces of essentialism are most pronounced in *Romola*. Romola's feminine sympathy and lovingness are presented as inherent qualities, strengthened rather than destroyed by patriarchal oppression. The men in *Romola*, with the exception of Savonarola, are characterized by masculine alienation and hostility. In their estrangement, they ironically share one experience; a common fate of futility and defeat spun out of their self-absorption and self-aggrandizement. The deaths of Bardo, Baldassarre, Dino, and Tito, resulting from their obsession with the immortality and power to be found in the patriarchal pursuits of scholarship, religion, and politics, signify the novel's rejection of any objective that excludes feminine sympathy.

The essentialist link between biological gender and values which dominates the depiction of human nature and values in *Romola* determines the underlying structure of the plot. Contrary to the criticism that Romola vacillates between feminist and reactionary proclivities, between striking out for independence and submitting to patriarchal

oppression, she is found to be consistently revolutionary in that her life serves as a stark, condemnatory contrast to the patriarchal experiences of alienation, violence, and downfall. The juxtaposition of opposing feminine and masculine experiences in *Romola* is crowned by the contrast between the fable-like, idealized account of the help and guidance that Romola renders to the poor, the sick, and the ignorant, and the systematic annihilation of her patriarchal oppressors. Hence, the essentialist conception of human nature gives rise to a more explicit, sharply defined dualism in the portrayal of human values in *Romola*.

In *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, the representation of human nature is more complex and realistic. The influence of the social environment upon the individual is taken into account and the simplistic, stereotyped identification of values with biological gender avoided. The portrayals of Esther, Mrs. Transome, Dorothea, and Rosamond reveal that women are neither inherently nor wholly sympathetic. As social beings, they do not only internalize conventional ideas of what women's natures ought to be. Women, like men, are drawn to uphold the prevailing values of patriarchy by the false hope of attaining power and enlightenment for themselves.

Mrs. Transome's strong-willed nature and adulterous past have excited praise for her as a feminist rebel against patriarchal authority. However, it is ironically possible to trace Mrs. Transome's unconventionality to her adherence to

customary patriarchal values. In the light of this, the feminist meaning of Mrs. Transome's story may be derived not from her rebellious individualism but the sobering truth that women unknowingly and willingly contribute to their own oppression in the patriarchal environment.

The means of escape from patriarchal oppression is through the revaluation and affirmation of feminine values and qualities, as revealed in the stories of Esther and Dorothea. Esther progresses from an initial conformity to conventional prejudices and customs to a growing realization of the baseness and shortcomings of patriarchal values and institutions such as class-consciousness, materialism, and chivalric love. Having learnt to esteem feminine values instead, and to cultivate feminine qualities in herself, Esther is rewarded with marriage to Felix which at once satisfies the emotional needs of her feminine nature and makes a feminist statement as a symbol of interdependence achieved. Esther's story may thus be deemed ideal in that she is spared the suffering and the compromise that mark the struggles of other Eliot protagonists against their patriarchal environment. The knowledge of suffering which enables Esther to affirm her feminine values is gained vicariously; the sight of Mrs. Transome's anguish which Esther attempts to soothe gives the final impetus to her decision to reject her inheritance of Transome Court, *Felix Holt*'s synecdoche for patriarchy, and to commit herself to a life of interdependence.

Dorothea too is initially blind in her exaltation of the patriarchal scholarship and religion. She falls into the error of marrying Casaubon and unwittingly subjects herself to his tyrannical patriarchal selfishness. Through a close reading of Chapter 42 of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea's agonizing struggle to come to terms with her husband's moral, mental, and emotional inadequacies is established as the climactic moment when feminine values prevail over the influence that patriarchal conventions have had on her nature. Nevertheless, *Middlemarch* presents no idealistic, decisive triumph of the feminine values over the oppressiveness of patriarchal beings. The opportune death of Casaubon brings no easy release for Dorothea. Nor does her second marriage to Ladislav, the most idealized of the three marital relationships that are examined in my discussion of *Middlemarch*, bring about a utopian removal from the patriarchal milieu. Dorothea and Ladislav remain participants in social reality, though on their own terms. Despite Dorothea's affirmation of her feminine values, her story may be read as an elaboration of the insight offered in Mrs. Transome's tragedy into the insidious workings of patriarchal oppression. Feminine beings are entrapped even as they strive to overcome the influence of their patriarchal environment.

Patriarchal tyranny is so deeply ingrained in the social thought and environment of *Middlemarch* that even a

mindless, mild-mannered person like Mr. Brooke is capable of chauvinism. Indeed, the most relentless tyrants in *Middlemarch* are supposedly harmless individuals whose very weaknesses ironically intensify their oppressiveness. Casaubon is old, decrepit, and emotionally crippled. Learning that he might die soon and clutching desperately at the glory and respect that have so far eluded him in his scholarly labours, Casaubon turns his impending death into an excuse to force Dorothea into carrying on with his futile work. Womanhood is both Rosamond's weakness and her advantage. The artificiality and superficiality of her nature may be attributed to patriarchal ideas of women that reduce them to ornaments. Thus, Rosamond's skin-deep beauty and seeming submissiveness ironically turn out to be the perfect facades for concealing her remorseless selfishness.

Patriarchal qualities are thus not depicted in Eliot's fiction in men alone. Neither is feminine sympathy represented solely as women's virtue. The values for which women are idealized and by which they are constrained in patriarchal ideology are revalued as universal human virtues. In Eliot's fiction, there are male characters with feminine qualities and values. Savonarola in *Romola* is depicted as a man with an embattled nature, whose feminine self-transcendence is assailed by patriarchal self-aggrandizement. Though he meets with the same ignominious fate of defeat and death as the other men in the novel, he is treated sympathetically for his conscientious struggles

against his patriarchal inclinations and for his humility in defeat; he alone of the men in *Romola* recognizes his own reprehensibility. In the analogy drawn between the moral radicalism of *Felix Holt* and Eliot's feminist ideas, the hero's rejection of the values and conventions of his patriarchal milieu to devote himself to unassuming, modest acts of caring takes on the significance of an act of feminist nonconformity. Felix's relationship with Esther which, according to some critics, merely replicates stereotypes of male dominance and female submission, is reinterpreted as containing a deconstruction of patriarchal chivalry and exemplifying the life of mutual dependence.

Nevertheless, Eliot is not wholly successful in breathing life into her feminine heroes. In the case of Felix, the relatively shallow exploration of his psyche makes him appear one-dimensional, unrealistic, and thus, unconvincing. This encumbers his demanding role as the key to the novel's inversion of meanings and values conventionally attached to the patriarchal institutions of politics, the law, patrimony, rank, and the chivalric code. The intense, realistic portrayal of Mrs. Transome indisputably imparts greater dramatic power and emotional appeal to the sections of the novel that deal with her. Consequently, the unity of *Felix Holt* as a feminist text has been overshadowed by the inconsistent quality of characterization.

Little has been said in feminist hermeneutics of

Lydgate's role in the revaluation of feminine values and qualities although it is generally accepted that his character and life correspond to Dorothea's. The feminine capacity for sympathy in Lydgate's nature exists alongside patriarchal values and prejudices. Thus, he is capable of an altruistic desire to perform work which would benefit society on the one hand, and distorted, self-aggrandizing expectations of women and marriage on the other. Lydgate's subsequent abandonment of his large aims to salvage his marriage to Rosamond is widely lamented as the defeat of his sympathetic impulses. Nevertheless, his readiness to accept Rosamond's nature for what it is and to accommodate himself to her is seen as an enlargement, rather than diminishment, of his feminine sympathy. The sense of tragedy which surrounds Lydgate's end is thus intensified by his bitter inability to appreciate the heroism of his own actions.

In *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, essentialist representations of human nature and values may have been avoided but the dualistic opposition of the patriarchal values to the feminine remains evident. Nevertheless, dualism no longer takes the elementary form of polarizing the sexes. The conflict between patriarchal and feminine values may take place between a man and a woman but it also occurs within the characters themselves. Esther's patriarchal self-conceit and materialistic view of life are challenged by her growing feminine consciousness. Despite Mrs. Transome's patriarchal imperiousness, she possesses a

feminine reverence and a need for love that are expressed in her silent endurance of the humiliating exploitation of the Transome estate by her former lover, Jermyn, and in the hopes she places on her son, Harold. The struggles between sympathy and self-aggrandizement in the mixed natures of Dorothea and Lydgate are dramatically drawn as psychologically true, poignant preludes to their heroic acts of sympathy. What they achieve through reaching out to others with sympathy may be insignificant or transient but the detailed analyses of the conflicts that rage within them invest their efforts with a significance that reaches beyond the outcome of their actions.

The dualistic opposition of feminine to patriarchal values that is manifested on the level of conflict between individual and society itself, structured as a patriarchal institution, is touched on in the discussion of *Felix Holt*. Refuting *Felix Holt*'s reputation as Eliot's political novel, as well as the parallel commonly drawn between the novel's politics and Eliot's stand on feminism, an analogy is instead inferred between moral interpretations of the novel and Eliot's radical feminist vision. Social institutions, values, and customs such as politics, the law, trade, class-consciousness, capitalism, materialism, and chivalric love are represented in *Felix Holt* as embodiments of patriarchal values. Hence, the hero and heroine of *Felix Holt* assert their feminine values by refusing to conform to social mores and customs.

The prevailing dualism in Eliot's view of human values is to some extent mitigated by the significance she gives to values and qualities that are traditionally denigrated or overlooked in patriarchal thinking. Sympathy is defined in patriarchal ideology as a quality associated with the private sphere of women and domesticity. In Eliot's fiction, sympathy is depicted as an ameliorating force, both on a personal and public level. Romola's good works among the poor in Florence and in the village to which she drifts, Felix's and Esther's endeavour to alleviate the poverty and ignorance of the working-class people within their reach, and the reforms which Ladislaw champions as a disinterested politician are public deeds which result from a spillover of sympathy from personal lives into the community. Nevertheless, the greater emphasis in Eliot's writings falls on the deeds, thoughts, and omissions of sympathy that occur at a personal, individual level. This does not give rise to a reiteration of patriarchal ideas of sympathy but to a rectification of the conventional disparagement of the private sphere. The disappointment that Lydgate encounters in his marriage and professional life warns against the patriarchal folly of prioritizing public achievement at the expense of private fulfilment. All Lydgate's powers of discernment and sympathy are applied to his public ambitions, leaving him quite blind and complacent in his views on the private matter of marriage. He ends up being

quite mistaken in his choice of a wife; a mistake that proves to have grave repercussions on his public life as well. Thus, Eliot's writings contend that whatever we do in our private lives bears the same significance as our actions in the public sphere.

The bi-polar opposition of self-sacrifice and self-gratification in which self-sacrifice, being traditionally associated with women, is considered a negative, powerless trait in contrast to the masculine ideal of independence, is rejected and replaced in Eliot's fiction by the ideal of interdependence or a life of mutual sympathy. Interdependence, although derived from feminine qualities, is proposed as a universal human ideal. In *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, the traditional closure of marriage takes on new significance as the symbol of the interdependence enjoyed by Esther and Felix, and Dorothea and Ladislav. Romola's heroism is crowned by the life of mutual affection that she attains as materfamilias and spiritual guide to the unorthodox family she has created. In caring for Tessa and her children, the symbols of Tito's betrayal of Romola and themselves victims of his deception, Romola has managed to make something meaningful out of the patriarchal legacy of fraudulence and faithlessness.

My readings of *Romola* and *Felix Holt* suggest that there is a greater degree of consistency in both novels than is usually perceived in feminist hermeneutics. The lives of the eponymous protagonists which are commonly disparaged for

conforming to reactionary patriarchal concepts of femininity and masculinity, acquire feminist significance when read as narratives of resistance to the dominant morality. The feminine values espoused by the eponymous protagonists lead them to stand outside and in opposition to the patriarchal system.

In summary, Eliot's fictional representation of gender and values contains elements of essentialism and dualism but it may, on the whole, be deemed to have transcended the conservatism and elementariness of essentialist and dualistic thought. By delineating characters whose values are not determined by their gender, by portraying women who assimilate patriarchal qualities and men who uphold feminine values, by denouncing patriarchal oppressiveness and sympathetically depicting the suffering inflicted upon feminine beings by unconscionable patriarchal selfishness, by revaluing the private sphere and the negative patriarchal concept of dependence, Eliot succeeds in investing the values and qualities traditionally associated with women with revolutionary significance.

Sympathy and the concomitant qualities of self-doubt and self-transcendence as defined and depicted, as revalued and valorized in Eliot's fiction is feminist. Sympathy revalued empowers women with the realization that their contributions from the private sphere to the development of human culture and civilization deserve as much recognition as public achievement. Sympathy revalued is the foundation

of interdependence which holds out the promise of self-fulfilment for women as well as men. Thus, the traditionally enervating quality of sympathy is endowed in Eliot's fiction with feminist meaning and force.